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ABSTRACT

Mental health and career development have the potential to affect each other reciprocally, yet very little has been written about the combined effect of mental health and career development of college students. College students seeking services in college career and counseling centers often present both types of issues simultaneously or both become apparent while counselors work with them. Many students seen in college career centers are symptomatic of depression or anxiety, while presenting concerns about choice of a major or career. It is, therefore, in the best interest of students to have both mental health and vocational services available to them during college or graduate school. Correlational studies between mental health and career development variables affecting college students may give direction for additional studies. With additional research focusing on this topic, researchers and practitioners may be able to collaborate on the development of a theoretical model addressing the interaction of college mental health and career development. (Contains 31 references.) (JDM)

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Mental Health and Career Development of College Students

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Mental Health and Career Development of College Students

Mental health and career development have the potential to affect each other reciprocally, yet very little has been written specifically about the combined effects of the mental health and career development of college students. Nevertheless, as many practitioners will attest, college students seeking services in college career and counseling centers often present both types of issues simultaneously or both become apparent in working with them. For example, students seen in college career centers often present with symptoms of depression or anxiety as well as concerns about choice of major or career. Students seen in college mental health or counseling centers dealing with the same issues (depression and/or anxiety), or others, at times likewise present with vocational concerns which may affect, or be affected by, their mental health status. Additional mental health issues such as those related to family relationships (Kenny, 1987) and personality factors (e.g., Soldz & Valliant, 1980; Ge & Conger, 1999) may also have reciprocal effects on college students' vocational and mental health functioning and success. It is therefore in the best interest of students to have both mental health and vocational services available to them during college or graduate school as well as other settings, and for the providers of these services to be cognizant of potentially interactive issues.

Bridging the Vocational-Mental Health Gap

Theoretical Foundations

Donald Super (1951, 1963, 1980) was one of the first to propose a life-span developmental theory where career and personal counseling are seen as equally important in the career decision-making process. Super (1963) believed that making a career choice was linked with implementing one's vocational self-concept. Recently, there has been a movement to bring

back the integration of career and personal counseling and to implement it in practice (Heppner, O'Brien, Hinkelman, & Flores, 1996; Schultheiss, 2000). A holistic view of personal and career issues is crucial for counseling college students, particularly those who are simultaneously developing their identity, purpose, and interpersonal connections (Schultheiss, 2000).

Wrenn (1988) claimed that it is essential to view clients as "dynamic wholes" that are composed of many related dimensions. Emphasizing the need to integrate personal/mental health issues in career counseling, Kidd (1998) observed that emotion is rarely elaborated on in career theory and advocated for increased emphasis on the role of emotions in career counseling. Similarly, Manuele-Adkins (1992) argued for greater attention to emotional and psychological issues of career clients.

Although attention in the literature to the intersection between work and mental health has increased, most of the related literature has focused on adult work concerns, the unemployed, or vocational-rehabilitation issues (e.g., Kokko & Pulkkinen, 1998; Myers & Cairo, 1992). The particular issues and corresponding needs of college students have, for the most part, been ignored.

Emphasis in career development has been on vocational outcomes with little attention to psychological distress that may be present or reduced as a result of career interventions (Multon, Heppner, Gysbers, Sook, & Ellis-Kalton, 2001). Few investigators have studied the effects of career interventions as treatment for more significant problems in overall functioning, such as anxiety disorders (Blustein & Spengler, 1995). Yet students' psychological and career adjustment (or maladjustment), may be integrally connected (Blustein, 1987; Herr, 1989). Psychological distress is important to consider in career counseling, as career counseling may be helpful in reducing distress (Blustein & Spengler, 1995; Herr, 1989).

As others have argued (e.g., Kates, Greiff, & Hagen, 1993), we believe that psychological distress may exacerbate underlying career/vocational symptoms and may lead to more serious psychiatric syndromes and/or vocational issues if ignored or ineffectively addressed in counseling. This, in turn, may result in a spiral of continuously reduced overall functioning. As such, we believe that when providing career and mental health services to college student populations, it is critical to examine the interface between psychosocial and career development.

The Interface between Psychosocial and Career Development

Psychosocial development is necessary for successful academic and work performance. Chickering and Reisser (1993) described seven dimensions of college student psychosocial development including developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. Through relationships, students learn how to express and manage feelings, how to share on a deeper level, how to resolve differences, and how to make meaningful commitments (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). These factors can have an impact in both college and the workplace. Winston and Polkosnik (1986) found that students who engage in relationships characterized by greater trust, independence, and individuality also tend to perceive that they have more control over successful academic performance, which may also translate into successful work performance.

The college experience is a time of self-exploration, change and growth. For many students, particularly those of traditional age, college marks the beginning of increased independence, decision-making, and shifting roles. Some students find the change refreshing and manageable; others have difficulty making the transition. First-year students at times find

themselves overwhelmed and may begin to experience psychological distress that affects their academic and vocational functioning.

Identity development is a core therapeutic issue in counseling traditional age college students (Hamachek, 1988). Shannon (1983) investigated the adolescent experience, emphasizing the developmental tasks of adolescence as central in adolescent development, with acquiring a stable identity and occupational choice as two of the major tasks. Indeed, individual differences in identity formation during college-age years are related to patterns of personal adjustment (Waterman, 1985).

In an empirical investigation of the relationship between identity and vocational development, DeGoede, Spruijt, Iedema, & Meeus (1999) studied a group of 1,222 Dutch adolescents and young adults (aged 15-24 years), including those of college age. They examined the effects of stress in vocational and relationship development on the formation of identity, the effects of identity formation on adolescent mental health, the influence of career stress on mental health, directly or via identity, and differences in these effects for young men and women. Results of the investigation revealed that vocational stress was associated with a less achieved vocational identity, particularly in young men. Occupational and relationship identity were similarly associated with mental health (i.e., the more achieved the identity, the better the person's mental health).

Emotional and behavioral problems are significantly influenced by contextual stress experienced both by students themselves and by other members of their families (Ge & Conger, 1999). Family relations have potential impact on college student mental health and career development. For example, family or university community responses to a student's depressive

experiences may prolong them (Kietner & Miller, 1990). Adolescents' responses to distress also differ and are affected by their parents' stress caused by economic factors (Ge & Conger, 1999).

Stability and valuing of family ties positively influence students' sense of confidence and well-being (Kenny, 1987). This, in turn, may increase confidence in career decision-making and general sense of purpose. Overly close or overly detached family ties do not promote individual identity development but lead generally towards autonomy (Kenny, 1987). How this might affect vocational decision-making is unclear, but autonomous individuals lacking their own identity may tend to conform to family desires or, if very autonomous, may choose a career radically different from what their family expects or wants for them.

Recent Empirical Studies Addressing the Intersection of Career and Personal Counseling

Several empirical studies published in the past 18 months have addressed the overlap between career and personal/mental health counseling among college student populations. Pace and Quinn (2000) reported the results of a two-year study that included 1,690 students who sought counseling services at a Midwestern state university. Results of the investigation revealed that 11% of clients who sought career counseling as their primary presenting concern also received treatment for mental health issues. Results also showed that 20% of clients who sought counseling for mental health issues received career counseling.

Saunders, Peterson, Sampson, and Reardon (2000) asked 215 undergraduates (26% men, 74% women) to complete assessments of career indecision, anxiety, locus of control, depression, and dysfunctional career thinking. Results revealed significant, positive relationships between depression and career indecision as well as between depression and dysfunctional career thoughts. Results also included a significant, negative correlation between depression and vocational identity.

Niles, Anderson, and Cover (2000) found additional evidence to support the interaction of personal and career issues in counseling. Their findings revealed that although clients' intake concerns primarily focus on career exploration issues, clients also cite the need to address education-related issues and ego-dystonic emotions related to work. Furthermore, despite the focus on career concerns and goals at intake, client's concerns during future sessions appear to lack such a focus and, instead, tend to include several non-career, more ego-dystonic emotional issues.

Anderson and Niles (2000) used a content analysis system to classify career counseling clients' responses to questions about the helpfulness of their recently completed counseling experiences. The results of the analysis revealed that the kinds of self-exploration and emotional support gains reported by career counseling clients are similar to the types of gains reported by clients of traditional, mainstream psychotherapy. Anderson and Niles discussed the results of their study in the context of their support of previous research suggesting a close relationship between the processes of psychotherapy and career counseling.

When considered as a body of research addressing the topic of mental health and career development of college students, the literature reviewed in this paper points to one very clear conclusion: Providing the most effective career and mental health services to college students requires an examination of psychosocial, vocational, and personal issues within the counseling context. Whether a student presents primarily with mental health issues or with career related issues or concerns, it is imperative that counselors and psychologists consider the interaction of mental health and vocational issues when developing a treatment plan and selecting intervention strategies.

Implications for Practice, Training, and Research

With an increased awareness of the interaction between the mental health and career needs of college students, counseling psychologists have begun to recognize the implications of this interaction within practice, training, and research contexts. The following discussion provides a brief summary of some of the more salient issues across these three dimensions.

Implications for Practice

Because adolescent maladjustment appears to significantly increase the risk for long-term problems in personality characteristics, this formative period may provide a particularly opportune time for effective intervention (Ge & Conger, 1999). Students may need help in reframing their expectations of career counseling. Some may have chosen career counseling to avoid dealing with their psychological distress. If counselors can help clients understand the connections between psychological distress and career problems, career counseling may be an effective means of both reducing clients' psychological distress and resolving their career problems (Multon et al., 2001).

High levels of psychological distress in students who seek career counseling may be counter to expectations for counselors and students (Multon et al., 2001). Multon et al. (2001) promote a holistic approach to career counseling in which presenting concerns are not dichotomized as "career concerns" or "personal concerns", but the needs of the individual are emphasized. College counselors need to view students holistically and to integrate the goals of psychological and career adjustment into their counseling treatment plan.

Schultheiss (2000) proposed a relational career counseling view based on research supporting the facilitative nature of attachment relationships in regard to development and adjustment. Schultheiss proposes a relational perspective to conceptualize and intervene in the

personal, emotional, and career development challenges of college students. In this model, the client's relational context is used as the base connecting personal and career domains.

Clients needing both mental health and career counseling should be directed to appropriate services. Referrals will depend on the arrangement of services on the particular campus. Some college counseling centers provide career services, whereas others offer these services separately. Depending on the presenting concerns and the particular campus arrangement of services, it may be appropriate for the same counselor to provide both types of services, or for the student to be seen by two different counselors. This determination must be made on a case-by-case basis.

Implications for Training

Counselors working with student career clients should be aware of the possibility of psychological distress (Blustein & Spengler, 1995) and be well trained in both career counseling and psychotherapy skills (Niles & Pate, 1989). The requisite skills in these areas are not mutually exclusive (e.g., working alliance is important in both). Many career counselors may be reluctant to discuss personal issues because they do not have advanced training in psychotherapy. Yet, there is still a need to acknowledge how personal issues influence career exploration and decision-making and to make appropriate referrals where needed.

Heppner et al. (1996) studied the positive and negative experiences related to career counseling conducted by counseling psychology trainees. Providing career counseling to clients was reported as the most frequent experience that counselors-in-training perceived as having a positive effect on attitudes about career counseling. Some counseling trainees reported that working with clients helped them understand the salience of work in clients' lives. This indicates a need for trainees to receive practica experiences with career clients. Still, other counselors

emphasize social-emotional concerns. Coursework was rated second most frequently as producing positive effects on counselor attitudes about practicing career counseling. Attitudes toward professors, mentors, or experts in the field were rated as the third most frequent experience positively affecting counselor attitudes. Fourth were personal insights about career counseling and the field of vocational development.

The highest number of responses about negative experiences of career counselors were experiences with mentors, professors, and colleagues who said negative things about career counseling. Students believed some faculty members were disparaging and bored with the field and thus relegated it to a low status and taught it in tedious and ill-prepared ways. Trainees perceived that many psychologists viewed "career concerns" as less important than "personal concerns." Coursework was listed as the second most frequent negative experience.

Clearly, trainees are not receiving enough exposure to career development to help them develop abilities in this area and there is less emphasis in course work and practica on career issues than on social-emotional issues (Heppner et al., 1996). Many students take only one career counseling course, and their experiences in this course may have a profound influence on their attitudes regarding vocational psychology.

The quality of training must be improved in integrative approaches to career and mental health counseling interventions. Trainees should work with career clients before trying to help social-emotional clients, and faculty should attempt to teach in a creative and interesting way, integrating a more complete view of clients and encompassing all the major domains of their lives. Interventions taught to trainees should integrate components of career and personal counseling, approaching counseling in a more holistic manner (Heppner et al., 1996). Counselors should be taught that effective career/mental health counseling can be enhanced with a

multimodal approach, and that advanced and creative techniques can be utilized within such an approach (see Heppner, O'Brien, Hinkelman, & Humphrey, 1994).

Implications for Research

Continued empirical attention addressing the overlap between mental health and vocational needs of college students is warranted. Correlational studies between mental health and career development variables affecting college students may give direction for additional studies. Although quantitative studies in this domain are limited and, as such, should be continued, we are especially hopeful that additional qualitative studies will be conducted in the years ahead. Qualitative research may be used to develop the groundwork for further investigation of the relationship between career and mental health issues of college students. With additional research focusing on this topic, perhaps researchers and practitioners can collaborate on the development of a theoretical model addressing the interaction of college mental health and career development.

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